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Published in:
Religions

DOI:
[10.3390/rel10090531](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090531)

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Document license:
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Citation for published version (APA):
Sen, A. (2019). Gods, Gurus, Prophets and the Poor: Exploring Informal, Interfaith Exchanges among Working Class Female Workers in an Indian City. *Religions*, 10(9), 1-13. [531]. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10090531>

Article

Gods, Gurus, Prophets and the Poor: Exploring Informal, Interfaith Exchanges among Working Class Female Workers in an Indian City

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Received: 1 July 2019; Accepted: 10 September 2019; Published: 17 September 2019



Abstract: This article revolves around the narratives of Sabita (Muslim), Radha (Hindu) and Sharleen (Christian), migrant women in their mid-forties, who have been working as maids, cooks and cleaners in middle-class housing colonies in Kolkata, a city in eastern India. Informal understandings of gendered oppressions across religious traditions often dominate the conversations of the three working-class women. Like many labourers from slums and lower-class neighbourhoods, they meet and debate religious concerns in informal ‘resting places’ (under a tree, on a park bench, at a tea stall, on a train, at a corner of a railway platform). These anonymous spaces are usually devoid of religious symbols, as well as any moral surveillance of women’s colloquial abuse of male dominance in society. I show how the anecdotes of struggle, culled across multiple religious practices, intersect with the shared existential realities of these urban workers. They temporarily empower female members of the informal workforce in the city, to create loosely defined gendered solidarities in the face of patriarchal authority, and reflect on daily discrimination against economically marginalised migrant women. I argue that these fleeting urban rituals underline the more vital role of (what I describe as) poor people’s ‘casual philosophies’, in enhancing empathy and dialogue between communities that are characterised by political tensions in India.

Keywords: informal interfaith dialogues; gender; labour; urban poverty

1. Introduction¹

Sabita (Muslim), Radha (Hindu) and Sharleen (Christian) were waiting for a local train in an inner-city railway platform in Kolkata, a city in eastern India.² All three women are in their mid-forties and have been working as maids, cooks and cleaners in middle-class housing colonies in the city, two of them for almost a decade. Sharleen came to live in the outskirts of Kolkata from a suburban Dalit (low caste) Christian slum in Chennai, a city in southern India, after she fell in love with a Christian Bengali labourer (Kolkata being the capital of the state of West Bengal), who did occasional manual work in other Indian cities. The women were waiting for a train connection that would take them to their respective suburban slums. They took small cups of tea from a shop on the train platform, and looked around for a place to sit. Wiping the sweat on their foreheads with the edge of their saris, they eventually sat under a tree whose branches had grown over the station fences, to create a spot of shade on the platform area. While I joined them, precariously balancing my squatting position, Sabita and

¹ I would like to thank the editors and reviewers of this special issue for their comments on this article. I am grateful to the Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore) for offering me a senior visiting research fellowship during which this article was written.

² The identities of my research participants and the names of their slum areas have been anonymised.

Radha, my research participants, told me that Sharleen had learnt Bengali well. Sabita whose hidden name was Asma, asked Sharleen: 'Do your employers not mind that you are Christian? My birth name is Asma, and I never use it. I don't remember it at times. I am worried that Hindu employers will not let me cook in their kitchen, lest it gets polluted by Muslim hands.' Sharleen looked perplexed. She said she preferred to use her Christian name and wear a long skirt to work. Sharleen was far more conscious of denying her original Dalit identity; she assumed that her low caste position before she converted to Christianity would be more distasteful in upper caste Hindu households, as her particular community is also known as the 'untouchables' within the historically hierarchical Indian caste system. Radha, looked up from her tea, and snapped at the other women: 'Does it matter whether you are Muslim, you are Christian, and I am Hindu? We are all polluting the homes of rich people. We are all dirty, poor women. Stinky armpits united front (*bogole gandho oikko*)!' At which point, the local train whistled into the train station. And while bidding me goodbye for the day, Radha said: 'This machine [the train] doesn't care about religious divides. *Ei jontrota dharmabhed bojena*. But this man does [pointing towards the ticket checker who sexually harasses Sharleen, assuming that Christian women are western in dress and attitude, and thus loose and sexually available].' Sabita and Radha boarded the train, carefully keeping Sharleen between them, just to ensure that the ticket checker doesn't brush up against her.

This article will explore such informal inter-religious discussions and shared understandings of gendered oppressions that determine the contours of conversational cultures developed by urban working-class women. My ethnographic landscape is Kolkata, where Hindu, Muslim, and Christian women from slums and lower-class neighbourhoods meet and debate religious concerns in informal 'resting places' (under a tree, on a park bench, at a tea stall, on a train, at a corner of a railway platform). The women pause in these places to greet fellow workers, who are usually travelling long distances across the city. I will show how the anecdotes and daily stories of struggle, culled across multiple religious practices and discourses, intersected with the existential realities of urban workers. They temporarily empowered women to create loosely defined gendered solidarities in the face of patriarchal authority, and reflect on the daily discriminations faced by migrant women. My ethnography highlights how sceptical feminine reinterpretations of orthodox religious dictates allowed subaltern women to critically reflect on the indifferent role of religious practices in alleviating the deteriorating socio-economic conditions of the urban poor. For the purpose of this article, I refer to 'interfaith' as constructive and critical conversations among people, which promotes interaction and engagement over the topic of religious advocacies.

There is a significant amount of interdisciplinary scholarship which give emphasis on the role of dialogical processes in the making of interfaith relationships, and in establishing empathy between communities (cf. Ahmed 2018; Muwahidah 2008). Many authors underline the role of committed religious leaders in bringing together communities to instil peace and mutual recognition, especially in multicultural urban environments (see Catto 2017). These leaders often take on the task of interpreting religious texts in a liberal and inclusive manner, so that ordinary followers engaging with interfaith dialogues can envision the commonalities (and not just the conflict) in social capital shared between different religious traditions (Karner and Parker 2008). In the context of South Asia, for example, these dialogues are also carried out through the sharing of rituals and festivals organised by community leaders in prominent religious sites, such as the celebration of the Muslim festival of Eid in a traditionally Sikh gurdwara.³ In this article I upturn this hierarchy of interfaith dialogues, by underlining the low-end initiatives taken up by ordinary religious women to step outside the narrow spatial and cultural confines of tradition. Even without the trappings of formal leadership, the semi-literate women workers created rough but robust dialogue about mundane interpretations of textual and

³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/dehradun/gurudwara-opens-doors-to-muslims-to-offer-namaz-on-eid-ul-adha/story-YOrYOevzJuhVobs2z6ptSM.html>.

socio-religious practices, while encountering a life and urban populations outside the remit of their singular domestic and religious spaces.

Some authors state that the creation of neutral spaces is far more significant in sustaining long-term interfaith relationships in the city, and advocate for the inclusion of neutral prayer spaces in the context of urban development (Moon and Berger 2016). These new spaces are designed in such a way that they remain devoid of religious symbols. They do not have the weight of historical sacralities embedded in traditional religious institutions such as in ancient temples, medieval churches, and even in conventionally designed urban mosques (e.g., with minarets). Yet they still provide an interface of interfaith between different religious groups. Gilliat-Ray (2005), in her study of neutral prayer spaces in London, however show that the creation of impartial spaces is a flawed project, as the dominant religious group, inviting other religious leaders and their congregations for establishing dialogue, can simply exhibit their claim over that space in more subtle ways. For example, Christian congregations could display a make-shift altar and cover it with a white table cloth, or Muslim communities could set up a series of low taps which are mostly found in mosques for the washing of feet before Friday prayers. Other scholars like Sikand (2003) critique these modernist forms of neo-religious dialogues, and urges for a revival of age-old syncretic traditions and sites, in which different religious traditions have remained historically bonded over fundamental human desires. For example, the shrines of Muslim *pirs* (saints) in India are 'neutral' in that they have been visited by lower class Muslims, Christians and Hindus for women's fertility and economic prosperity within the family.

While this wider literature is important in promoting the significance of interfaith exchanges and tolerance, they overlook the role of daily debates carried out by ordinary people across a religious spectrum; who might inhabit segregated living spaces, but are compelled to rub shoulders in labour sites or on public transport. These sites are not artificially created as 'neutral spaces' in the city. Since they are not specifically designed for devotional purposes, these scattered public spaces create opportunities for people to engage in curious conversations about religions, Gods and gurus; often without the overbearing moral anxieties (e.g., about being politically correct and using non-abusive language) that symbolise inter-religious exchanges in neutral religious zones. Instead of privileging a spatial interpretation of religion, I argue that these fleeting urban rituals underline the far more vital role of everyday, gendered and what I describe as poor people's 'casual philosophies' (such as the anti-Christian, sexualised gaze of a warm-blooded Hindu man pitted against the non-judgemental egalitarianism of a cold machine, described by Radha in the introductory vignette), in enhancing empathy and dialogue between communities that are usually characterised by political tensions and communal violence in India.

The rise of Hindu nationalism or *Hindutva* (born in the context of the anti-colonial struggle) as a chauvinistic and majoritarian nationalism has fostered a politics of fear and hatred towards minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. Over several decades, the successes of Hindu nationalism have not only spawned militant Hindu cultural organisations and political parties, it has also generated a number of radical Islamic organisations dedicated towards curbing Hindu xenophobia (Jaffrelot 2009). Since the Indian Independence (in 1947), several Hindu nationalist groups such as the Bharatiya Janata Party/Indian People's Party (BJP) have used the *Hindutva* bandwagon to win political influence in many Indian states, and the BJP has continued to hold power at the central government through phases of India's electoral history. A fundamental element of the *Hindutva* rhetoric is the lustful body of the blood-drinking (i.e., beef-eating) Muslim man. The latter propels the popular desire to organise Hinduism along the lines of a militant nation, in order to save the integrity of the pure Hindu woman (Banerjee 2006). Isolating Hindu women from other minorities is thus a vital discursive ingredient of Hindu nationalism, as books, pamphlets, educational workshops, training camps, and vituperative speeches by *Hindutva* leaders, espouse stories about the rape and pollution of Hindu women by men from Other religions (Sen 2007; Kovacs 2004). The imaginary of a united, undiluted Hindu nation in which women are pure, and men are in service of the nation, sustains the overall ideological framework of Hindu nationalism (Sarkar and Butalia 1995). A number of ethnographies

on banal Hindu nationalism in the city have highlighted the ways in which these grand nationalist narratives permeate and rigidify local moral economies (Hansen 1996; Menon 2010; Sen 2007). Against this backdrop, my ethnography highlights how underprivileged women workers can temporarily distance themselves from the divisive politics of hate, and use daily anecdotal exchanges to create quotidian, fun and cordial inter-religious friendships.

2. A Brief Overview of Female Domestic Workers in Kolkata

Several cross-sectional studies carried out in slum areas of central and suburban Kolkata highlight the concentration of rural-urban women workers engaged in multiple labour sectors and informal economies. Large sections of these women fail to overcome their long-standing, low-income socioeconomic status, even though many of them eventually enter formalised and cottage industries in the city as low-skilled workers (especially small-scale businesses in Kolkata run by local NGOs, which recruit poor women in making food, snacks, and pickles with long shelf lives). A number of micro-level surveys of slum women who enter into domestic labour, that is working in private homes as cooks, cleaners, care-givers, garbage collectors and maids, show that these women are aged between 14 and 60 years.⁴ The nature of their work is precarious and uncertain, as some of the maids work full-time with minimum wage (90 USD/month) in multiple homes. Due to the absence of formal legal contracts and the lack of strong trade unions for female domestic workers, the salaries of these women are determined by individual bargaining and the goodwill of employers. Maids with a degree of education have better opportunities in expatriate and upper-class households, where the employers are sensitive to the high level of religious and class-based inequalities that are embedded in the globalisation of cheap labour (see Grover 2017; Schlieuwe 2017). However, most domestic workers have their occupational histories intimately tied to numerous economic, physical and mental health problems, often stemming from class-based discrimination in households.⁵ For example, several poor women workers remain sexually vulnerable to their male employers, over and above their encounters with other men who harass them as they navigate public places (Sen et al. 2019).

I started research among these slum women in the context of the Indian demonetisation crisis in November 2016, mainly to study the ways in which poor slum women with no formal bank accounts, responded to the unprecedented banning of large rupee notes by the central government (Sen et al. 2020). The ethnography for this article was collected over the course of three years of (intermittent) fieldwork with a group of slum women who worked as domestic servants in a south Kolkata middle-class housing colony (ibid 2020). Many of my female research participants came to live in the suburban slums from nearby district areas, after they lost their relatively secure employment in small industries and farming outlets. Banerjee (2018), in her work on tea plantations in Bengal, showed how this form of rural-urban migration is relatively common in the region. Through her study of the economic crises faced by tea estates in north Bengal, she explores how their abrupt closures led to the migration of female plantation workers to distant urban areas in search of alternative employment. The author states that these women found jobs as domestic and care workers in other cities, where they had to acquire new skills to sustain themselves in these faraway labour markets. The women had to cope with the constant invisibilisation of paid domestic work as 'natural' feminine labour (cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and the elderly), and as low skilled service that is particularly suitable for migrant women. In a similar vein, my longitudinal study of women domestic workers in Mumbai (Sen 2007, 2018, 2019) and Kolkata (Sen et al. 2020) reveals that mounting domestic expenses and 'death of the countryside' (i.e., various economic losses and drying up of labour relations in rural areas), compelled them to substitute family incomes with some degree of participation in the domestic labour economy in the cities.

⁴ https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/7636/1/MPRA_paper_7636.pdf.

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2796775/>.

According to Wilks (2018), who studied the commuting practices of domestic workers in Kolkata, women's commutes—regular travel between home and work—is no doubt linked to processes of neoliberalism and urban development. At the same time, the practice of commuting is imagined as a complex mobility strategy, or a space for thinking, relaxing, and socialising. However, Wilks (2018) argues that these meta-discourses do not fit with the excruciatingly difficult 'daily passenger' experiences of poor women workers in the city. Using the notion of 'moving' ethnography, and reflecting on commuting as a category of analysis, Wilks (2018) explores how long and arduous journeys require careful and constant negotiation around time and money, and interrogates the impact of these journeys on women's relationships with employers, husbands and extended kin. Wilks (2018) eventually argues that women forge networks through this process of commuting, which in turn helps them endure the structural burdens of travelling. My research shows that despite the insecurity of travelling, and its importance in the day-to-day life of workers, women actively seek out brief moments of rest and conversation with friends and co-employees.⁶ For the purpose of this article, I want to draw out two examples of discussions on religion that were integral to some of these casual but complex conversations. Most often, the women did not turn to religion to accept poverty and suffering as their fate, but used their identities as women and as workers to develop a rough critique of women's everyday positioning within dominant religions in India.

3. Radha, Sabita and Sharleen as Urban Migrants

In 2016, during the course of my fieldwork, I met Radha (45 years) and Sabita (42 years). They were residents of two slums, which I will call Thanthania and Bhangur, both situated in the old north Kolkata suburb of Sovabazar. Unlike a number of maids and care workers who lived with the families of employees in the residential complex, Radha and Sabita preferred to work in multiple households in the neighbourhood which made their income less stable but more profitable. In 2011, Radha, her husband Bokul, and their young son came to stay with an uncle in Thanthania from Medinipur district after her husband lost work in a glass factory. The year after, Sabita and her husband Sobhom Alam decided to migrate to Bhangur, but they left their children behind with their grandparents in a village in Uttar Dinajpur, a district with a substantially large Muslim population in West Bengal. Both these suburban slum areas were located in political constituencies which had women councillors from the Trinamool Congress Party (TMC), a faction of the national Congress Party, which toppled the long-reigning Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) stronghold in the state. In 2011, when the TMC came to power in West Bengal, the state also swore in its first female chief minister (CM), who is currently the sole serving female CM in India. While Bokul joined his uncle in supporting TMC-sponsored local youth clubs and political activities, Sabita and her husband claimed that they stayed away from local politics to avoid disclosing their Muslim minority status.

Radha and Sabita started to travel together on suburban trains. When they became friends, Sabita shared her religious affiliation with Radha. According to Radha and Sabita, their conversations on low respect (*kom morjada*) for poor women did not start around the theme of religion. Initially, the duo discussed the strong presence of women politicians in the city, some of whom they greeted during campaigns in slum areas. However, when they met Sharleen (43) on the train, a Christian and a 'Madrasi' (Madras was later renamed as Chennai), they became more curious about the diversity of faith amongst them, and their discussions veered towards women, religion and sacred sites in the city. While Radha visited the temples and shrines that lined the Ahiritola river bank near Sovabazar, Sabita and Sharleen did not visit mosques and churches. Sabita failed to see the local mosque as a female-friendly space, and she only visited the *imam* (leader of the mosque) for marital advice during family discords. Though Sabita was particularly concerned about martial tensions, all the three women,

⁶ My research focuses on women as they dominated the domestic labour economy in the housing colony. I did not have equal access to the work and travel routines of male workers.

with their different migration trajectories, faced varying degrees of gender violence, from domestic abuse to economic exploitation at work. Sharleen did not like to travel long distances to ‘see God’, she said.⁷ But all the women did prayer rituals in their homes and identified themselves as ‘religious’ (*biswashi*). Despite their religious practices, the three women claimed that reflective conversations about other religions was not an integral part of their precarious daily lives. According to Radha: ‘There is a rush to cook and clean in your own home. And then run to cook and clean in other people’s home. Where is the time to sit, think and ask questions? Even in the temple I usually have time to ring the bell, touch my forehead on the stone steps, and again, run home.’ The women gained most of their knowledge about Islam, Sikhism and Christianity through watching Bengali news and soap operas which were popular among slum-dwellers, listening to radio programmes, and occasionally catching a Bengali/Hindi movie portraying the difficulties in inter-religious love affairs. The three workers often told me that they felt ‘happy to meet real people’ (*ki khushi lage*) from other religious faiths who could satisfy their small curiosities.

Thanthania and Bhangur saw few instances of Hindu-Muslim riots since the Calcutta Killings/partition-related violence in 1946⁸; even though the city did not manage to insulate itself from the nation-wide communal riots in 1992, triggered by the destruction of the Babri Mosque (by Hindu nationalists) in the north Indian temple town of Ayodhya. According to the slum residents, in recent times, tensions were aggravated within the Hindu communities over the control of prominent temples that had cropped up along the river banks. For example, in 2017, slum areas in Sovabazar violently clashed over the misuse of temple areas for illegal peddling of drugs and hooch. Most of the news articles that covered this incident gave emphasis on the fact that women actively participated in incidents of stone-pelting. While in conversation with Radha about this violence, I discovered that slum women felt more invested in chasing off hooch-sellers who furthered alcohol abuse in poor suburban areas, rather than in maintaining the sanctity of a sacred Hindu temple. This is starkly different from my long research experience in a communally tense slum area of Mumbai (Sen 2007, 2018), with a Hindu nationalist party at its helm, where a chunk of everyday conversations among women revolved around edging out Muslim populations from Hindu-dominated residential areas. And women’s political actions were often directed towards challenging or attacking the religious Other in public places, from abusing veiled Muslim women to taking part in religious riots. However, scholars of gender (see Bose 2001) researching the conditions of women in slums in Kolkata argue that ‘the communist influence’ created partnerships between different labouring communities which diminished, albeit superficially, such inter-faith frictions. For example, during its prolonged rule in the state (from 1977–2011), the Left Front coalition largely mobilised slum women, especially those inhabiting lucrative land along the railroads, to participate in anti-corporation/anti-demolition activism, thus clearly categorising class and capital as the urban Other. Despite the communist influence, studies show how poorly educated Muslim women continue to have far less access to the labour economy in comparison to low caste, rural Hindu migrants in Kolkata (see Husain 2005). Hence Sabita refused to be called Asma, even by her new-found friends in the city.

Radha and Sabita arrived in Kolkata around the time of emerging TMC rule, and they often claimed that they were not straightaway introduced to divisive religious politics in the city. With the growing successes of the BJP, ‘minority appeasement’ strategies touted by the TMC, and visibilisation of religious tensions in Bengal, both Sharleen and Sabita stated that they have become far more aware of communal politics in the region. The following sections are developed against this tentative backdrop

⁷ Sharleen came from a Pentecostal slum area in Chennai which had informal prayer networks and spontaneous Church sermons woven into the everyday lives of slum-dwellers (which I discuss later).

⁸ The 1946 Calcutta Killings or the ‘Week of the Long Knives’, was a period of widespread communal rioting between Muslims and Hindus in Kolkata (then known as Calcutta), over the demand for an autonomous region of Pakistan by the Indian Muslim League. This sovereign state was to comprise Muslim-dominated areas in the northwest and eastern region of India, including the Bengal province. Massive riots in Calcutta left 4000 people dead and 100,000 residents homeless within 72 h. These political demands and the ensuing riots eventually led to the Partition of India in 1947.

of migrant women encountering power, politics and poverty, while navigating an unequal labour economy in Kolkata.

4. Triple Talaq and Kali

In August 2017, the Indian/BJP government approved an executive order to make instant divorce among Muslims—a procedure called ‘triple *talaq*’ by which men could divorce their wives by uttering the word *talaq* or divorce in Arabic three times—a punishable offence (see (Ahmad 2009) for a nuanced interpretation of triple *talaq* in the Koran). Even though the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was accused of wooing Muslim women voters ahead of general elections due in 2019, the Supreme Court ruling declared triple *talaq* a non-bailable offence, carrying a jail term of up to three years. Many Muslim communities in India courted controversy by accusing the current *Hindutva*-inspired government of persecuting a minority religion by criminalising instant divorce. The bill stated that any Muslim man practicing triple *talaq* will be prosecuted, especially if the wife’s relatives lodged a case against him. It was assumed by policy-makers that a divorced Muslim woman could not be empowered enough to visit a police station unescorted, and register a case against her husband who was likely to be the father of her children. The bill was passed despite vociferous protests from opposition parties. Many women’s rights organisations described the bill as myopic, saying that it did not address issues related to Muslim women’s religious, economic and social insecurities, and demonised men from minority communities. Newspaper and media channels carried reports, discussions and debates about this controversy, with academics and experts either supporting or objecting to the implementation of the bill.⁹

In yet another journey on the train from work, Radha and Sharleen asked Sabita whether she had an opinion on the bill. They had all been following its progress on television. Before Sabita could answer, Radha explained to Sharleen, who was not an avid television fan, that Muslim men in Radha’s slum area felt humiliated and pressurised by the state trying to intervene in their religious conventions. Hence Radha was intrigued what Muslim women really thought of the controversy. ‘Islam does not allow you to arbitrarily desert your wife,’ clarified Sabita. She went on to explain to Radha and Sharleen that the Koran offered social and economic protection towards women, especially if they had been abandoned by their husbands. Even though Sabita was not literate, the kind *imam* in her neighbourhood had interpreted the Koran for her, and even told her that the text favored women who wanted to leave ‘husbands with no erection or no sperm’. The women paused to laugh. Sabita went on to discuss how the Koran allowed women divorcees to keep money, gold and property brought in through marriage, but in reality, men never offered that respect to women. ‘*Bill thuke ki kobe*, what can we achieve by slapping a bill?’ she asked. Sabita felt if Muslim men wanted to leave their wives and find other women to ‘fuck loudly’ (*jore chudbe*), they would simply do so. She said her male extended kin would never lodge a case in court; they would prefer to keep business and employment links alive amongst the male brethren, than seek justice for women. The men would also want to avoid awkwardness and tensions if they met each other in the locality or at the mosque. Both Radha and Sharleen nodded in agreement. ‘Religion does not matter here,’ added Sharleen, who now looked forlorn. ‘If poor men want to leave their poor wives, they will walk away. It doesn’t matter if they utter the three words of divorce or not. Sperm-less, soft-dicked men will blame the woman for being barren, unsexy and just leave. No point in what the Koran or the Bible says,’ she concluded.

At this point, Radha became wistful and wondered about Hindu men in her locality sending a divorce notice (instead of praying with a bowed heads and folded hands) to a local martial goddess called Kali. Sabita knew about Kali, but Sharleen stated she did not know much about that form of goddess worship. Kali, a popular indigenous mother goddess in Bengal, is the embodiment of

⁹ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/triple-talaq-bill-why-modi-govt-introducing-fresh-triple-talaq-bill-lok-sabha-now-1417979-2018-12-27>.

aggressive female power. The significance of the goddess Kali, represented as a bloodthirsty slayer, lies in the dramatic construction of assertive and angry femininity within the Hindu pantheon, the latter also consisting of benign and gentle Goddesses like Laxmi and Saraswati. According to Dalmiya (2000), who studied the iconography of Kali:

‘The feminine here is powerfully terrifying: A naked and intoxicated female—dark, bloodstained, and dishevelled dancing on the prostrate body of Shiva, her husband, with her tongue lolling out, wearing nothing except a garland of human heads around her neck, a girdle of severed human hands around her waist, and infant corpses as earrings. Yet, strangely enough, the devotee sees in this macabre picture an ‘impossible beauty’ and a ‘mother.’ The mother here is anything but domestic (engaged as she is in a battle-dance) and anything but nurturing (adorned as she is with symbols of death-skulls, corpses, and blood). In effect, then, it is the adherence to very traditional expectations (associated with being a wife and mother), rather than their abandonment, that enables Kali to be a self-conscious representation of opposites. Thus, because Kali is a wife and mother in very conventional senses, she suggests passivity and tenderness. But her manifest form is violent and uncaring.’ (Dalmiya 2000; p. 126)

This dualistic image of Kali as tender and terrifying has been interpreted by many scholars as holding feminist messages for women’s representational emancipation from subdued femininities (Dalmiya 2000, 2009; Rajan 1998). For semi-literate women like Radha, who could not engage with the more elitist language of scholarly feminism, the image of Kali and the everyday male devotion to the grotesque imagery of the Goddess in the region *should* generate male recognition of female power. Yet, the spirituality of male devotees precluded the rewriting of women’s powerlessness in daily gendered scripts. She asked: ‘Why are men, in the slums and in rich houses, hypocrites? Why bend in prayer before Kali and then rape your maid the instant at which your cock stands up (*banra khanra*)?’ She suggested that worship of female fearlessness embedded in the other-worldly image of Kali did not transform patriarchal behaviour of male devotees towards women in the ‘ordinary’ moral realm. Given the centrality of ethics in spiritual life, she wondered why the tables were never turned: that men could lead their lives in fear of women. And women could be re-imagined in daily life as violent and authoritative like Kali, also a mother, a joyful experience that poor women did not want to compromise on in order to be liberated from the daily grind of patriarchy.

The juxtaposition of these two rapid conversations, about *talaq* under Islam and Kali under Hinduism, highlighted the critical capacity of women workers to develop empathetic interpersonal engagements about the consequences of regulating women’s marital, maternal and material status by the state or by religious societies. Despite the introduction of contemporary laws and the presence of historically powerful female religious icons, which could celebrate and empower women in Islam and Hinduism, poor women highlight the absence of efficacy in these practices. The voices of female travelers provide empirically grounded critiques of masculinist performances of tokenism towards women’s elevated position within wider religious conventions, which I will highlight further in the next section.

5. Women Hindu Gurus and Female Christian Preachers

On yet another train journey with the trio, the discussion came to a Hindu female guru (*mataji*) from a neighbouring state, who was visiting a small temple. The temple was close to the slum where Radha lived, and she would regularly visit the *mataji* in the late evenings when she interacted with her followers. Radha stated that one evening she had asked the guru several questions about the fate and futures of poor women, and whether as a senior female protagonist in the world of Hinduism, she felt that their conditions would improve. The guru taunted Radha for being ‘dissatisfied’ (*‘ami naki okhushi’*) with what she already had. After all, Radha had a husband, a son, a source of income and she was alive. The guru said poverty and affluence were eventually ephemeral conditions. ‘Because whatever financial state in which people lived their lives, everyone will eventually die and be reduced to ashes on a funeral pyre,’ explained Radha. So, it would be better to lead a satisfied life

rather than waste it hankering for more material success. While listening to Radha, I was amused. I wondered whether this Marxian opium-advice had any resonance for underprivileged women whose understanding of 'satisfaction' was intimately related to their fundamental experience of 'survival'. Sensing my discomfort with the words of the guru, the women laughed again. Sabita sighed and said: 'All religions as interpreted by the 'children of prostitutes' (*khankir chele*, metaphorically referring to someone useless). Both male and female leaders would say it is a woman's duty to remain nurturing, sacrificial and undemanding, even when women live in abject poverty.'

In this context, Sharleen went on to reminisce about the particular importance of Pentecostal Christian female leaders in her slum in the suburban outskirts of Chennai. She said that the networks developed by slum women through the active presence of women preachers in slum life, provided lower caste Christian women with the emotional means to address their acute material and relational adversities. For example, female preachers created a space in which married women could dramatically vent about the stresses thrown up by life in poverty, such as domestic violence, alcoholic husbands and accumulated financial debt. Sharleen's narrative had resonances with the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Roberts (2016) in a Dalit Christian slum in Chennai, in which he shows that the prayer services offered by Pentecostal women preachers reproduced the slum as a caring community, against the uncaring and individualistic landscape of wealthy neighbourhoods in the city. Roberts (2016) argues that slum women made sense of conflict and rivalry in their everyday lives often by redirecting the responsibility of misfortune onto malevolence and sorcery, and by advocating that women's tears brought them closer to the lap of God. The author referred to this practice as the 'social technology of (women's) prayer' which constituted a novel social organisation of gendered mutual concern. As the primary source of collective support, women's prayer networks made visible and redistributed the personal narratives of women's suffering amongst the wider slum community. Sharleen stated that these religious processes, that displace suffering onto evil spirits and transform it into divine proximities, were not radical and only helped maintain status quo and mutual reliance in a marginalised urban area. 'These women would encourage crying about our distress but in sweet language (*mishti bhasha*). But if I wanted to lift my skirt and show my torn vagina after my husband banged me hard (*thapalo*) in a state of drunkenness, well, women's anger and revenge is not allowed. Only tears,' she concluded.

Sharleen's story about women preachers who resided with local communities fascinated her friends who had encountered the rare female guru or *pir* (Muslim saint) when they visited a temple or a shrine. Instead of focusing on the differences in their urban encounters with gurus, however, the women went on to discuss the extranormal powers of faith-based preceptors, as manifested in psychic healing of women with mental health issues, cure of women's infertility, taking away misfortune from abused women, blessing poor children to pass school exams, or even magic that got migrant women much-coveted secure employment in the city. While being superstitious and clicking their tongue to avoid getting cursed for 'talking badly of female gurus', the women proposed that these experiences, while crucial to guru-disciple relationships, were not directed towards unleashing divine feminine power (for example, described as *shakti* within Brahmanical Hinduism) in the world. While they appreciated the charisma and communicative skills of female priestesses, the women workers felt that these preachers did not have a socially transformative impact on disciples. Despite being fairly emotional about their interactions with female preachers, the women attempted to process the rational ramifications of their encounters. While the trio concurred that women preachers offered an integrated web of divine meaning in which women could review their relevance within the larger story of life, for example, to remain satisfied with little while facing the inevitability of death. But they were aware that subaltern women preachers, despite their superior capacity to impel social change, often 'adapting one's message to the particular time and circumstance' (Forsthoefel and Humes 2005, p. 7), did not overtly campaign for moral transformations that would eventually challenge migrant women's adversities within a wider society.

6. Crude Interfaith Conversations

In this section, I want to re-emphasise the illuminating power of these daily conversations about religions that are generated by migrant women in the city. These fragmented dialogues that take place in ambiguous, common urban areas, such as parks, trains, and stations which are not clearly identified as religious sites (e.g., they may have markers of religion in the posters of gurus on the train, but are not temples or mosque which mark the hegemony of one particular religion over another), allows women to share and comprehend the similarities and differences in women's treatment across religious genres. My ethnography shows how engagement with local understandings of religious and religio-legal discourses becomes an important tool for building common cultural knowledge and trust within women's labour economies. A number of scholars have written about subaltern cosmopolitanism (see [Zeng 2014](#); [Yeh 2008](#)) and illustrated how migrants and refugees find ways (often coercive and invasive) in which to expand their taste, skills and linguistic repertoire in order to adapt to new host cultures. But they have significantly underplayed the role of low-level gendered curiosities in developing interfaith dialogues. Through bringing forward the voices of three women from different religious backgrounds, I show that female workers who encounter other marginalised women through their widespread travel networks, use curious, crude and sexual talk about faith-based practices to dislodge their own ideas about gendered disharmonies between religious cultures. While analysing and realising that the conditions of women are similar across multiple religious traditions, women create affective spaces which are inclusive towards poor workers travelling across the urban employment spectrum.

In the broader context of India, modern Hinduism has spawned a range of global and new age female Hindu gurus (such as Amma), though they often do not have a role different from that of their male counterparts (see [Pechilis 2004](#)). Even within the narrower remit of Hindu nationalism in India, a number of female gurus and celibates have become highly prominent, who propagate a violently pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim rhetoric, while underscoring the domestic and servile role of women within the family and the nation ([Menon 2010](#); [Bacchetta 2004](#)). In Bengal, there have been many female gurus within religious schools (Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the great nineteenth century Bengali mystic, was initiated by a female guru) even though many sects in Hinduism have traditionally refused women the right to function as gurus (only as consorts). As [Copeman and Ikegame \(2012\)](#) have aptly shown in their study of guru logics in South Asia, gurus are nowadays distinctly active in a variety of overlapping fields, such as medicine, politics, higher education, and judiciary courts, not to mention religion. Such eclectic and charismatic religious leaders can usually create compassionate interfaith dialogue (by attracting followers from different religious faiths into a single congregation), and can advocate the outright rejection of extant traditions. The ethnographic vignettes above show that low-income women, who are fairly disengaged from high nationalist politics, conversion laws and modernising trends in global Hinduism, seek small-scale gendered solidarities and empowering interpretations of their daily suffering from women religious leaders. However, these local women priestesses, despite representing the high valuation of women conferred by their renunciation, do not introduce a strong, reformist content to their discursive engagement with the feminisation of poverty. Colloquial expressions of authoritative women entering arenas historically dominated by men are usually celebrated within 'western' feminist provenances, but the oral accounts of female religious followers show that the fluid permeating power of these preachers may be acknowledged; but the communication and dispensation of that power continues to endorse the ritual suffering of women. While this does not diminish the central act of devotion and worship conveyed by the guru's presence, women's informal chatter on the topic still suggest that the reciprocal compassion shared between the disciple and preacher dissuades poor women's willed action.

This brings me to the importance of the 'inter' in these localised interfaith crude conversations. I argue that migrant communities form one of the largest labour networks in commercial cities across the world. Poor people's casual reflective thoughts are integral to the circulation of urban floating populations flowing in and out of the legal and illegal work sector. While large sections

of these communities have strong political and religious affiliations, and they might even live in segregated neighbourhoods based on religious, regional and food (e.g., vegetarian and meat-eating) cultures, travelling long hours to arrive at their work destinations often gives them exposure to the diversity of religious thought and experience among the urban poor. Ramović (2018), who studies how the economy can contribute to peacebuilding in post-World War II socialist Yugoslavia, states that inter-ethnic cohesion can be brought about through the participation of a diverse workforce in labour councils and social activities at the site of employment. In regions affected by conflict, most workers who once lived in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods become deprived of ‘the other’ through ethnic cleansing. According to Ramović, ‘This leaves the workplace as one of the few remaining spaces for interaction between conflicting groups as the pursuit of livelihood—or the economic dimension of everyday—leads people to assign less importance to their differences.’ (Ramović 2018, p. 186) I would argue that women workers in Kolkata, who did not share a specific site of work, still used the social opportunities offered by the pursuit of employment to demystify and develop long-term knowledge about the Other. I show that women in various contexts of deprivation and marginality have the capacity to bring religious debates within their own cross-cultural spheres of gendered interests and urban influence. Even though these fleeting encounters may not create long-term economic change, as in the case of sustained self-management of workers in post-war Yugoslavia, I would still suggest that daily, unstructured interfaith conversations between workers generate wider opportunities for empathy and reconciliation between majority and minority religions.

7. Conclusions

In this essay I interweave aspects of gender, labour and poverty in the city to understand the interconnections between religious mandates and ordinary women’s meandering and meaningful ability to critique orthodox religion. The ethnographic vignettes described above show that poor women’s cautious ambivalence towards seeing religion as a source of feminine empowerment can set the tone for approaching the subject of interfaith conversations. I argue that these forms of random and rough conversations about religion is a starting point towards overcoming wider political misunderstandings and historical boundaries between various religious groups. Karl Barth’s (Barth et al. 1936) pioneering reflections on the doctrine and dogmas of God stated that it is only an incoherent conception of God and a scattered understanding of religion on the ground, that can be pitted against the omnipresent perception of a particular God and the isolationism of developed religions. Taking a leap away from grand theological theories, I show that this spirit to overcome religious categorisation remains alive in women’s casual philosophies and human metaphors, and these anecdotes create a mosaic of everyday worldviews about quotidian religious practices.

A significant number of urban scholars discuss the role of neutral sites which foster animated inter-religious dialogues between different communities (see Ipgrave 2013 for interfaith religious education in inner-city schools in the UK). While a number of these sites have been specifically created as secular zones without the accoutrements of formal religion, there are also other deeply religious spaces which have opened up to negotiations between religious groups. Spontaneous acts of religious support and crowdfunding towards vulnerable communities emerge during sudden crisis, especially while encountering persecution of minorities in the name of religion (such as Sikhs and Christians coming out to support Muslim communities after the mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand).¹⁰ There are however more invisible and unstructured spaces and cultures of co-operation that can create durable arenas of interfaith dialogue. I argue that the ‘inter’ in these interfaith conversations is intersectional, in that it lies at the juncture between class and urban mobility. Against the backdrop of masculinist Hindu nationalism, which is usurping discourses on Hinduism and closing off boundaries of interfaith dialogues, viewing Muslims and Christians as the global *jihadi*/colonial enemy is foreclosing the

¹⁰ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190319-new-zealand-christchurch-inter-faith-solidarity-after-mosque-attack>.

possibility of viewing patriarchy as poor women's everyday adversary. I would add that these limiting nationalist philosophies, diverting the attention of poor communities towards religious hatred, also cordons off the possibility of contesting women's precarity in the informal labour market as a social epidemic. Even the presence of strong trade unions and political parties in the context of urban poverty in India, that offer labour solidarities to marginalised women, create insular groups of female votaries. In the case of the rural-urban women workers that I have discussed in this study, it's the solidarity of 'being travelling women, that too with hungry bellies' (*cholti meyemanush, tao ba pete khuda*) that triumph over narrow religious devotionism. Sharing stories about the poor position of women in religious discourses becomes a source of gendered camaraderie in real life.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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